

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
NORTHERN DISTRICT OF TEXAS
DALLAS DIVISION

LUCAS A. NICKELSON
(#126086062),

Plaintiff,

V.

UNKNOWN OFFICER,

Defendant.

§
§
§
§
§
§
§
§
§

No. 3:20-cv-135-B-BN

**FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATION OF THE
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE**

Plaintiff Lucas A. Nickelson, detained at the Johnson County jail, facing a state prosecution for possession of a controlled substance, filed this *pro se* civil rights action concerning his arrest, prosecution, and, possibly, the conditions of his confinement. *See* Dkt. No. 3. His action has been referred to the undersigned United States magistrate judge for screening under 28 U.S.C. § 636(b) and a standing order of reference from United States District Judge Jane J. Boyle.

On January 24, 2020, the Court entered a Notice of Deficiency and Order, requiring Nickelson to file an amended complaint and either pay the filing fee or move for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* (“IFP”) by February 24, 2020. *See* Dkt. No. 4 (the “NOD”). The NOD warned Nickelson that his failure to take these actions by this deadline will “result in a recommendation that this action be dismissed for failure to prosecute and obey orders of the Court.” Dkt. No. 4 at 2 & 3 (citing FED. R. CIV. P. 41(b)). And the NOD advised him that, as the Prison Litigation Reform Act (the

“PLRA”),

applies to his case, under the PLRA, “[a] prisoner proceeding IFP in the district court is obligated to pay the full filing fee upon the filing of a complaint. [28 U.S.C.] § 1915(b)(1). No relief from an order directing payment of the filing fee should be granted for a voluntary dismissal.” *Hatchet v. Nettles*, 201 F.3d 651, 654 (5th Cir. 2000) (per curiam) (citing *Williams v. Roberts*, 116 F.3d 1126, 1128 (5th Cir. 1997); *McGore v. Wigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 607 (6th Cir. 1997)); *see, e.g., Bays v. United States*, No. 3:15-cv-1824-B-BN, 2015 WL 4930913 (N.D. Tex. Aug. 18, 2015).

Id. at 3.

It is now more than one month past the deadline to comply with the NOD, and Nickelson has failed to file an amended complaint and either pay the filing fee or move for leave to proceed IFP.

The undersigned therefore enters these findings of fact, conclusions of law, and recommendation that, for the reasons and to the extent stated below, the Court should dismiss this action without prejudice under Federal Rules of Civil Procedure 41(b).

Legal Standards and Analysis

Rule 41(b) “authorizes the district court to dismiss an action *sua sponte* for failure to prosecute or comply with a court order.” *Griggs v. S.G.E. Mgmt., L.L.C.*, 905 F.3d 835, 844 (5th Cir. 2018) (citing *McCullough v. Lynaugh*, 835 F.2d 1126, 1127 (5th Cir. 1988) (per curiam)); *accord Nottingham v. Warden, Bill Clements Unit*, 837 F.3d 438, 440 (5th Cir. 2016) (failure to comply with a court order); *Rosin v. Thaler*, 450 F. App’x 383, 383-84 (5th Cir. 2011) (per curiam) (failure to prosecute).

This authority “flows from the court’s inherent power to control its docket and prevent undue delays in the disposition of pending cases.” *Boudwin v. Graystone Ins.*

Co., Ltd., 756 F.2d 399, 401 (5th Cir. 1985) (citing *Link v. Wabash R.R. Co.*, 370 U.S. 626 (1962)); *see also Lopez v. Ark. Cnty. Indep. Sch. Dist.*, 570 F.2d 541, 544 (5th Cir. 1978) (“Although [Rule 41(b)] is phrased in terms of dismissal on the motion of the defendant, it is clear that the power is inherent in the court and may be exercised sua sponte whenever necessary to ‘achieve the orderly and expeditious disposition of cases.’” (quoting *Link*, 370 U.S. at 631)).

The Court’s authority under Rule 41(b) is not diluted by a party proceeding *pro se*, as “[t]he right of self-representation does not exempt a party from compliance with relevant rules of procedural and substantive law.” *Wright v. LBA Hospitality*, 754 F. App’x 298, 300 (5th Cir. 2019) (per curiam) (quoting *Hulsey v. Texas*, 929 F.2d 168, 171 (5th Cir. 1991) (quoting, in turn, *Birl v. Estelle*, 660 F.2d 592, 593 (5th Cir. Nov. 1981))).

A Rule 41(b) dismissal may be with or without prejudice. *See Long v. Simmons*, 77 F.3d 878, 879-80 (5th Cir. 1996).

Although “[l]esser sanctions such as fines or dismissal without prejudice are usually appropriate before dismissing with prejudice, ... a Rule 41(b) dismissal is appropriate where there is ‘a clear record of delay or contumacious conduct by the plaintiff and when lesser sanctions would not serve the best interests of justice.’”

Nottingham, 837 F.3d at 441 (quoting *Bryson v. United States*, 553 F.3d 402, 403 (5th Cir. 2008) (per curiam) (in turn quoting *Callip v. Harris Cnty. Child Welfare Dep’t*, 757 F.2d 1513, 1521 (5th Cir. 1985))); *see also Long*, 77 F.3d at 880 (a dismissal with prejudice is appropriate only if the failure to comply with the court order was the result of purposeful delay or contumacious conduct and the imposition of lesser sanctions

would be futile); *cf. Nottingham*, 837 F.3d at 442 (noting that “lesser sanctions” may “include assessments of fines, costs, or damages against the plaintiff, conditional dismissal, dismissal without prejudice, and explicit warnings” (quoting *Thrasher v. City of Amarillo*, 709 F.3d 509, 514 (5th Cir. 2013))).

“When a dismissal is without prejudice but ‘the applicable statute of limitations probably bars future litigation,’” that dismissal operates as – i.e., it is reviewed as – “a dismissal with prejudice.” *Griggs*, 905 F.3d at 844 (quoting *Nottingham*, 837 F.3d at 441); *see, e.g., Wright*, 754 F. App’x at 300 (affirming dismissal under Rule 41(b) – potentially effectively with prejudice – where “[t]he district court had warned Wright of the consequences and ‘allowed [her] a second chance at obtaining service’” but she “disregarded that clear and reasonable order”).

By not filing an amended complaint and by neither paying the filing fee nor moving for leave to proceed IFP, Nickelson has prevented this action from proceeding. And, by so doing, he has failed to prosecute this lawsuit and also failed to obey a court order (the NOD). A Rule 41(b) dismissal of this lawsuit without prejudice is warranted under these circumstances.

The undersigned concludes that lesser sanctions would be futile. The Court is not required to delay the disposition of this case until such time as Nickelson decides to comply with the Court’s directives.

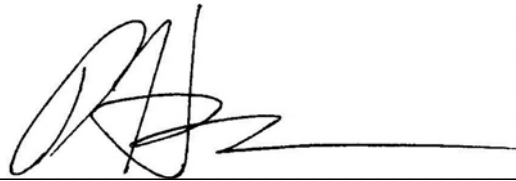
The Court should therefore exercise its inherent power to prevent undue delays in the disposition of pending cases and *sua sponte* dismiss this action without prejudice.

Recommendation

The Court should dismiss this action without prejudice under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 41(b).

A copy of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation shall be served on all parties in the manner provided by law. Any party who objects to any part of these findings, conclusions, and recommendation must file specific written objections within 14 days after being served with a copy. *See* 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1); FED. R. CIV. P. 72(b). In order to be specific, an objection must identify the specific finding or recommendation to which objection is made, state the basis for the objection, and specify the place in the magistrate judge's findings, conclusions, and recommendation where the disputed determination is found. An objection that merely incorporates by reference or refers to the briefing before the magistrate judge is not specific. Failure to file specific written objections will bar the aggrieved party from appealing the factual findings and legal conclusions of the magistrate judge that are accepted or adopted by the district court, except upon grounds of plain error. *See Douglass v. United Servs. Auto. Ass'n*, 79 F.3d 1415, 1417 (5th Cir. 1996).

DATED: April 15, 2020

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'DH', followed by a horizontal line.

DAVID L. HORAN
UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE